

## **Pare away the folds of time, in search of warmth**

(A review of Peihang Huang's work "Past and Present" 2017)

Text by Chang Li-Hao

*"--and there follows the pain, which says of itself that it will never end. Yet with this pain there comes, surreptitiously, something else which approaches a joke but is not one, something which hallucinates, a little similar to the gesture of a conjuror's handkerchief after a trick, a kind of lightness, totally opposed to what one is feeling."*

-John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance*

Despite our differences in material wealth, socio-political, religious, and cultural backgrounds, people living in every corner of the world will at one point ask: "What kind of life are we living? What will happen in the future?" Yet in the global digital era, with more information than ever before, we do not have a strong understanding of our existence. In these contradictory conditions, events that have happened in the past continue to appear today in similar form. What does this mean, and how will it impact us? These questions, which include nostalgia, identity, and universal truths, may only be incited when you leave your familiar environment.

The most recent work of Peihang Huang draws on questions with no answers. Having lost her mother, left home and moved to England to join her husband, and lived the life of an "immigrant" in recent years. Huang contemplates her journey, the connections with her mother and her family history. In an attempt to process these feelings, Huang captured the essence of the human condition, which is one that none of us, including her mother, can escape. These experiences have changed Huang's work to an unprecedented degree.

*"Past and Present,"* documents the change that has taken place in Huang's life in dazzling colours that wash over the viewer. Huang's style is reminiscent of Taiwan's ever present, advertising signs draws on Taiwan's characteristically open youth subculture by welcoming the familiar and foreign into these vivid, compositions. The faces present in Huang's works are always indistinct, blurred

and intentionally distant; they represent inarticulate cries, independent of time and space, that test our courage to face the unknown.

### Facing Human Suffering and Misfortune

On the face of it, *“The Boat and The Sea”* recalls news of Italian coast guards rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean Sea; but it bears deeper significance of Huang, who uses it as a vehicle to express her feelings about her mother’s journey across the strait of Taiwan in the 1950’s. The imagery also conveys Huang’s debt to English painter Joseph Turner’s *“The Wreck of a Transport Ship”*. Three very different journeys, all with the sole motive of leaving a familiar environment to start a new life--to die at sea or to survive in a gamble of fate. *“The Boat and The Sea”* connects Huang’s family history to the new world she has entered her personal journey. It adds a personal perspective to tragic events and, in so doing, it offers comfort and a degree of salvation.

In the series *“Past and Present,”* smoke sheathes the warped, distorted buildings in the composition, to the point of bleakness. In these fragmented spaces, one space-time folds into another, appearing identical but drastically different. They are images sampled from the archive of history, but also disseminated by media, overlapping to become a mirage, illusory but real, the same tale of smoke and war, death quietly brimming over. Even so, a handful of survivors still walk upon broken rubble, looking up at the sky to appreciate moments of freedom. Images of the young Syrian boy Omran Daqneesh, at the innocent age of five years old, sitting in the ambulance, covered in blood and dust with a look of fear and helplessness became widespread across the globe through media. Inspired by these images, Boys excises his features, adding another boy’s stature, and suddenly, like magic clears the smell of blood, transforming the viewer’s sympathy and compassion into lightness. Cherish all that you have.

All these are declarations to the world, whether similar events or corresponding feelings, regardless of past, present and future, will continue to occur. But Peihang Huang does not impart a grim, severe gaze upon the term *“eternal return”* like Milan Kundera, refusing to allow distant disasters to become spectacles on a computer or phone screen, Huang still holds a trace of hope, aspiring to continue to pare the folds of time, finding infinite warmth and inclusion in humanity.